Alcoholism in the Police Community

Choir Practice And Its Effects On The Law Enforcement Family

The story begins at the end of the midnight shift. The guys were stopping by McGee's Bar to unwind and deal with the stress of the day and Mike wasn't about to miss out. I'll just have a couple of beers. It can't hurt. But a couple turned into six and I found myself pulled over to the side of the road with blue lights flashing in my rearview. As the officer from the next county walked up to my car, I flashed my badge out the driver's side window. The officer replied, "Have you been drinking tonight?" I answered, "I just got off at midnight and had a few brews with the guys." He took my ID and asked me to step from the car. I opened the door and nearly fell out onto the road. He asked me to walk the line and then asked me to be seated in my car as he took my keys. Back to his car he went with my keys and ID in hand. The next thing I see is the overnight Watch Commander from my Department pulling up and asked me to get in his car. He explained that he was taking me to our DUI testing office and my car would be towed to the office. That night I blew a .20 and soon realized I needed help with my problem. This was my second time and my last chance!

"Alcoholism is a primary, chronic disease with genetic, psychological, and environmental factors influencing its development and manifestations. The disease is often progressive and fatal. It is characterized by continuous or periodic: impaired control over drinking, preoccupation with the drug alcohol, and use of alcohol despite adverse consequences, and distortion in thinking, most notably denial."

How can officers, knowing and seeing on a daily basis what alcohol does to some of the citizens they serve and protect, continue to drink knowing the dangers of alcohol. Mike's story is not unique. Most people would conclude that the law enforcement occupation involves significant stress. Some officers describe it as "periods of boredom mixed with moments of sheer terror." Both police administrators and police union officials, not to mention the officers and their families, acknowledge that police officers experience high rates of heart disease, and other stress-related health problems, in addition to marital and relationship difficulties, depression and suicide, and, of course, alcoholism, more than other professions.

Alcoholism and associated addictions are prevalent in police departments and law enforcement agencies of every size and type.

The first thing an officer must do is admit there is a problem. A major barrier to recognition of the problem as well as to entering treatment is denial, which can take many forms and may be reinforced by forces that apart from the officer's own denial. Related to the issue of denial is the question of trust and confidentiality. Denial is a particularly handy defense mechanism that allows people to believe that they do not in fact have a problem. Denial is also a major characteristic of the disease of addiction, and is both logical and to be expected. Denial may be shared by family members and co-workers, usually for different reasons. Some of the myths and realities are as follows:

Myth: All alcoholics are skid row drunks.

Reality: Many alcoholics hold high-level jobs and function well at work for years before their performance is noticeably affected by drinking.

Myth: Alcoholics drink every day.

Reality: Alcohol abuse patterns vary. Some people daily, and others only on weekends.

Myth: If an alcoholic can stop drinking, he or she doesn't have a problem.

Reality: Abstinence is not a sign that someone is free of alcoholism. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) calls these abstainers "dry drunks" because they have no real understanding of their condition, no new ways to cope, and are almost certain to "fall off the wagon."

Myth: Once an alcoholic, always and alcoholic.

Reality: Alcoholism is a disease for which recovery is guaranteed if the alcoholic begins and sticks with a recovery program. If not, what's guaranteed is a premature death.

The Concept of Enabling

Rule #1 "Don't Talk" _ We all see it, we all smell it, and we all know its there! But no one dare talk about it. Maybe it will go away if we ignore it and if we are good enough.

Rule #2 "Don't Feel" _ Feelings sometimes lead to thoughts, and thinking can lead to a need for change. In the alcoholic family, the process of change is blocked through a denial of feelings. The last

thing an officer wants is confrontation by his family or boss. The officer begins to dread coming home at night, as all that is waiting are accusations of infidelity from the spouse, and demands on their time from the children. These demands keep them away from what becomes compulsively the most relieving activity of their life - and that is "Choir Practice."

Rule #3 "Don't Trust" _ Distrust is a way of life and a matter of survival for those in the law enforcement profession. Many officers state that the only people you can trust are cops. All of the many trust issues become magnified in the substance abusing officer's family. Many promises are made only to be broken the next day. This behavior follows from the officer to his or her children when they realize they can't trust their parent and maybe because of their parent's profession, they can't always trust their friends at school.

It's Time To Make A Change = It's Time For Treatment

There are some obstacles to overcome. The first is fear. What if someone finds out I'm going for treatment? The next obstacle to overcome is the denial system on everyone's part. It is necessary not only to treat the substance abusing officer but the whole family. Treating the officer alone would be like taking a piece from a puzzle, changing the shape of that piece, and then trying to replace that changed piece in the same puzzle; it won't work. It is misleading to think that things will be perfect if and when the alcoholic stops drinking. Recovery from alcoholism is a long haul project with many ups and downs. AA and other 12-step programs say the process never ends. They encourage alcoholics to make a lifetime commitment to a recovery program.

Information for this article was taken from "I Love a Cop" by Ellen Kirschman, Ph.D and "Law Enforcement Families - Issues and Answers" an FBI Publication.